

Difficulties and Challenges of the Nuns in Ho Chi Minh City about Charity Work During Covid-19

(Case at Quan Am Monastery - Phu Nhuan)

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Abstract

In this research article, we rely on the "giving" theory of Marcel Mauss (2015) to clarify the difficulties and challenges of nuns in Ho Chi Minh City regarding charity work. We studied the case of nuns practicing at Quan Am Monastery in Phu Nhuan district. With enthusiasm and unrelenting efforts, the Nuns have overcome many difficulties and challenges to provide timely support to people in difficult circumstances. At the same time, the findings from the research will also open up many approaches and policy suggestions to further promote the potential and power of religion in building a compassionate, tolerant and progressive society. sustainable development.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the complicated and prolonged Covid-19 pandemic, the charity activities of Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City have become a bright spot, spreading the spirit of kindness and sharing in the community. With enthusiasm and unrelenting efforts, the Nuns have overcome many difficulties and challenges to provide timely support to people in difficult circumstances. Among typical religious establishments, Quan Am Monastery emerges as typical models of compassionate spirit and practical action in social security work.

To gain a deeper understanding of the charitable activities of nuns at this religious institution, conducting a qualitative research is extremely necessary and meaningful. Through the application of methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, group

discussions and document research, the project will shed light on important aspects such as: the motivation and dedication of nuns. , how to organize and implement activities, the advantages and difficulties encountered, as well as the impact and social significance of charity work during the epidemic period.

Besides practical significance, this research adds to the knowledge base on the role and contribution of Buddhism in general and nuns in particular (Nuns in Ho Chi Minh City) in solving problems. society. At the same time, the findings from the research will also open up many approaches and policy suggestions to further promote the potential and power of religion in building a compassionate, tolerant and progressive society. sustainable development.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Theoretical basis

Alms-giving is an important concept and action in Buddhism, not only expressing compassion and sharing but also carrying profound meaning in terms of doctrine and practice. In the opinion of French sociologist Marcel Mauss (2015), "gifting" is not simply giving an item, but it creates a social connection and obligation to reciprocate between the giver and the receiver. Similarly, when a Buddhist practices almsgiving, they not only meet the recipient's material needs, but also receive "merit" in return - a valuable form of "spiritual property". At the same time, this action also demonstrates the responsibility and moral obligation of Buddhists to the community.

In Pāli, the term "dāna" is used to refer to the act of giving alms, meaning compassion, the desire to bring welfare to others. Right from the early days of Buddhism, the Buddha encouraged the lay community (Upāsaka and Upāsikā) to practice almsgiving, which included providing food and clothing for monks and helping the poor. In the context of Indian society at that time, which was dominated by the Brahmanical caste system, giving alms also had the meaning of leveling disparities and inequalities. Monks during this period focused entirely on practicing and propagating the Dharma, and were not allowed to accumulate private property to avoid giving rise to greed and reducing the faith of those who did not follow Buddhism (Tinh Van, 2000).

However, through the stages of development of Buddhism, especially the Mahayana period, the concept and form of almsgiving have expanded and changed to suit the circumstances of the times. Mahayana Buddhism focuses on the ideal of liberation for all sentient beings, so almsgiving is not limited to material needs but also addresses spiritual aspects. "Dharma giving" is the transmission and sharing of Buddha's teachings, helping people access the path of enlightenment and liberation. "Fearless giving" is the act of dispelling fear, bringing a sense of peace and trust to others. The appearance of these two new forms of almsgiving shows a change in the

thought and practice of Mahayana Buddhism, towards the goal of saving sentient beings in a more comprehensive way (Tinh Van, 2000).

Mahayana Meanings chapter 12, an important commentary of Mahayana Buddhism, points out the difference between the Hinayana and Mahayana concepts of almsgiving. Accordingly, almsgiving in Hinayana has the nature of a personal exchange, people practice almsgiving with the hope of receiving blessings and peace in the future. Even though it is not possible to receive an equivalent item in return immediately from the monks, the alms-giver still believes that his or her actions will bring benefits and happiness in the next life. Meanwhile, giving alms in the spirit of Mahayana not only aims to eliminate one's greed and stinginess, but is also associated with compassion and the purpose of helping sentient beings escape from suffering. This transformation demonstrates the development and adaptation of Buddhist teachings in meeting spiritual needs and social circumstances over time (Tinh Van, 2000).

Thus, it can be seen that almsgiving in Buddhism not only has a simple charitable meaning but is also an important means of practice. Through the practice of almsgiving, Buddhists practice altruism, compassion, and let go of greed and attachment to material possessions. At the same time, giving alms also helps build and strengthen relationships between members of the Buddhist community, spreading the spirit of mutual support and sharing. When a person gives alms with a pure mind and without expecting anything in return, they will accumulate merit and create good causes for the process of practice and self-improvement.

In addition to spiritual benefits, almsgiving in Buddhism also contributes to improving the material and spiritual lives of needy people in society. Providing food, clothing, and shelter for the poor not only helps them overcome immediate difficulties, but also demonstrates the Buddhist community's care, sharing, and sense of responsibility for the lives of the poor. In addition, forms of almsgiving such as "dharma giving" and "fearless giving" also bring spiritual comfort,

faith and life direction to people who are in psychological or religious crisis.

In modern society, the spirit and actions of giving alms in Buddhism continue to be promoted and applied in a flexible and creative way. Many Buddhist organizations and charities have been established, implementing programs to support the poor, orphans, people with disabilities, people in remote areas... They not only provide basic necessities. essential but also organizes study courses and lectures to improve the spiritual life of the community. Many Buddhists also actively contribute finance and effort to build worship facilities, schools, and hospitals, providing development opportunities and access to services for people in remote areas. Through this, we can see that the Buddhist spirit of almsgiving has gone beyond religious limits, becoming a humanistic value and a source of inspiration for charity and social welfare activities.

However, the practice of almsgiving also requires understanding and mindfulness of the practitioner. Giving alms with the mindset of seeking fame, profit or reward will not bring real spiritual benefit. On the contrary, when giving alms with a pure compassionate mind, without distinguishing between objects and without attachment to one's own actions, Buddhists truly demonstrate the spirit of altruism and accumulate merit on the path of practice. . At the same time, we need to be careful and skillful in how we give alms, avoiding creating dependence or damaging the recipient's self-esteem.

2.2. Research methods:

To conduct qualitative research on the charitable activities of nuns at Quan Am Monastery during the Covid-19 epidemic, we conducted a survey from June 2022 to February 2023. Quan Am Monastery is located at 384 Truong Sa Street, Ward 2, Phu Nhuan District, Ho Chi Minh City. The nuns said that due to Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings, meetings were held to participate in charity work via Zoom. Interviews usually last 1-2 hours on issues such as preparing for charity activities, with open-ended questions to dig deep into the experiences, thoughts, emotions and challenges that the Nuns face. encountered

in the process of charity work. Through this, the researcher will better understand the motivation, meaning and value that charity work brings to the nuns themselves.

The researcher studied documents such as activity reports, photos, and videos about the nuns' charity work that were collected for analysis. This helps researchers gain more information about the scale, frequency of activities, number of beneficiaries and social impact of charity work during the pandemic period.

III. DIFFICULTIES, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS, LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT CHARITY ACTIVITIES OF NUNS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2.3. Charity activities of nuns during the Covid-19 pandemic

Charity is one of the core activities of Buddhism, demonstrating the compassion and altruistic spirit of Buddhism. During the Covid-19 pandemic, nuns in Ho Chi Minh City quickly implemented many charity programs and activities to support people in difficulty, especially poor families, people who lost jobs, and Covid-19 patients.

Buddhist monasteries and organizations have mobilized resources from contributions from Buddhists, sponsors, and support from benefactors. Nuns have taken advantage of their network and reputation to call for community participation in charity work. Many nuns have directly participated in the process of planning, organizing and implementing relief activities, showing great enthusiasm and determination in helping people overcome difficulties.

Besides providing material support, nuns also play an important role in taking care of the spiritual life of Buddhists and the community during the epidemic season. Consolation, encouragement and sharing programs have been organized through online lectures, prayers for peace, and psychological counseling. Nuns have brought peace, hope and faith to many people during this time of uncertainty and anxiety.

One of the nuns' most practical charitable activities is providing food and necessities to people in difficulty. In the context of social distancing and supply chain disruption, many families have faced deprivation and hunger. The nuns have actively mobilized and distributed rice, instant noodles, cooking oil, sugar, milk, and other essential foods to the people.

In addition, the Nuns also focus on providing medicine and medical supplies to Covid-19 patients and their families. During a strong outbreak of the disease, many people have difficulty accessing medicine and medical services. Monasteries have coordinated with medical organizations and donors to purchase and distribute masks, antiseptic water, medication, and other necessary medical supplies. This timely support has contributed to reducing the financial and mental burden for many families with sick relatives.

Nuns also do not forget to pay attention to the needs of vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women, people with disabilities and the lonely elderly. Special charity programs have been implemented to provide milk, diapers, clothes, blankets and other essential items for these groups. The meticulous and thoughtful care of the Nuns has brought comfort and hope to many families facing difficult circumstances.

Facing the challenges of the pandemic and social distancing, nuns in Ho Chi Minh City have flexibly converted to online charity forms to adapt to the new situation. The application of information technology and social networks has opened up many opportunities for nuns to continue carrying out their mission of compassion in the context of restrictions on travel and large gatherings.

One of the popular methods is to organize online fundraisers and sponsorship campaigns through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Zoom. Nuns have taken advantage of their influence and prestige to call for contributions from Buddhists and the community through livestream programs, sharing messages of compassion, and telling touching stories about difficult circumstances. people's towels. The strong spread of these

programs has attracted the attention and response of a large number of people, helping to mobilize significant resources for charity work.

In addition, nuns also actively use applications and online platforms to connect and coordinate charitable activities. Charity groups are established on Zalo, Facebook and other applications, creating a united and effective network in sharing information, planning and implementing relief activities. The application of technology has helped nuns overcome geographical barriers, save time and resources, and enhance coordination and cooperation between monasteries and Buddhist organizations.

A notable point in the transition to online charity is maintaining transparency and accountability in the management and use of charity funds. The nuns have proactively publicized information about the amount of donations, the list of donors, and how funds are allocated through media channels and periodic reports. This transparency not only creates trust for contributors but also demonstrates the nuns' sense of responsibility and ethics in charity work.

However, the transition to online charity also poses certain challenges for nuns. Verifying information, ensuring fairness in resource allocation, and maintaining strong connections with beneficiaries become more complex in a virtual environment. Nuns have had to constantly learn, adapt and be creative to overcome these difficulties, while ensuring efficiency and humanity in charity activities.

Mauss (2015) argues that gift exchange creates bonds and reciprocal obligations between the giver and the recipient. The recipient of a gift has an obligation to reciprocate the gift in some way. This creates a system of social exchange based on the principle of "give and take".

In the context of the pandemic, the nuns' charitable activities can be seen as a special form of gift exchange. Nuns, as donors, have mobilized and distributed material resources such as food, medicine, and medical supplies to those in need. They also take care of the spiritual life of Buddhists and the

community through consolation, encouragement and sharing programs.

The relationship between nuns and beneficiaries in this charitable activity is not completely reciprocal and obligatory as in normal gift exchange. The person receiving help from the Nuns is not bound to reciprocate directly in material terms. Instead, the response can be on a mental and emotional level, such as gratitude, respect, and faith in nuns and Buddhism.

This reflects the characteristics of Buddhist charity, which emphasizes compassion, altruism and the spirit of unconditional giving. Nuns carry out charitable activities not to expect direct response, but from the practitioner's duty and responsibility in helping sentient beings. They view almsgiving and helping as a way to practice morality and accumulate merit on the path to enlightenment.

We can also explain the nuns' charitable activities from Mauss's (2015) perspective on the social and symbolic role of gifts. According to Mauss, gifts are not only a mere material exchange, but also carry cultural, emotional and power meanings. Giving and receiving gifts contributes to establishing, strengthening or changing social relationships and power hierarchies.

In the pandemic situation, the nuns' charitable activities not only meet the urgent material needs of the people, but also bring them comfort, hope and faith. The presence and support of the Nuns demonstrates the important role of Buddhism in the spiritual life of the community. Through giving alms and helping, the Nuns strengthen the trust and respect of Buddhists and society towards the church.

Besides, the application of technology and conversion to online charity forms also shows the adaptability and flexibility of nuns in the new context. They have taken advantage of the power of social networks and online platforms to spread messages of compassion, call for community cooperation, and increase the effectiveness of charity activities. Maintaining transparency and accountability in charity fund management also demonstrates the ethics and reputation of the nuns.

This transition also poses challenges in maintaining humanity and direct connection with beneficiaries. Nuns must strive to ensure that the spirit of compassion and sincere care is still conveyed effectively, despite the displacement of cyberspace.

2.4. Difficulties and challenges

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, nuns in Ho Chi Minh City (specifically the nuns at Quan Am Monastery) have encountered many difficulties and challenges in the process of carrying out volunteer work. These barriers not only affect the effectiveness of charity activities but also cause significant pressure for participating nuns.

One of the biggest challenges facing nuns is the lack of financial and material resources. The pandemic has caused a negative impact on the economy, causing many people to face difficulties and not be able to contribute to charitable activities like before. This led to a significant decrease in offerings and funding to Buddhist monasteries and organizations.

Not only facing difficulties in mobilizing finance, nuns also face challenges in accessing and purchasing essential items to support the community. During the period of social distancing, many production and supply facilities had to temporarily suspend operations, causing scarcity and increased prices of goods. The Nuns must find ways to contact suppliers, farmers and traders so that they can have enough food, medicine and necessities to support the people. The gap between rising demand and limited supply has created great pressure on nuns in charity work.

In addition to resource difficulties, nuns in Ho Chi Minh City also face challenges in reaching and identifying those who really need support. In the context of limited information and movement restrictions, the process of searching and verifying difficult circumstances becomes more complicated.

Many families and individuals in crisis due to job loss, quarantine or being affected by the epidemic often suffer silently and are afraid to share their situation. They may live in areas that are difficult to reach or have no connection to charitable organizations. Identifying these subjects requires effort and sophistication on

the part of the nuns in collecting information and coordinating with local authorities and community organizations.

Even after identifying those who need support, accessing and giving charitable gifts still faces many obstacles. Distancing and blockade measures have restricted travel, making it difficult to get in person to deliver gifts. Nuns must find ways to coordinate with volunteers, local charity groups or the government to deliver relief goods to the people. This process requires creativity, flexibility and perseverance to overcome barriers.

Regulations on social distancing and travel restrictions during the pandemic have created many barriers for nuns' charitable activities. To ensure safety and comply with the law, Nuns must limit movement and direct interaction with beneficiaries. This makes it difficult to visit, encourage and share love with those who are facing difficulties.

In the past, nuns often organized direct charity events, gave gifts in person and listened to people's thoughts. However, in the context of the epidemic, these activities are forced to move online or indirectly through intermediary organizations. The lack of direct connection can reduce the closeness and attachment between nuns and the community.

In addition, social distancing also affects the ability to organize peace ceremonies, Dharma conferences, and charity fundraising events. Many monasteries have been forced to suspend or limit the scale of these events, making it more difficult to mobilize resources and inspire Buddhists. In this situation, nuns need to be creative and flexible in maintaining connections with the community, shifting to online platforms and finding ways to adapt to the new situation.

In addition to difficulties in resources and physical distancing, nuns also face health pressure and the risk of infection during charity work. By coming into contact with many people and going to high-risk areas, the Nuns put their own safety and health at risk.

Despite following preventive measures such as wearing masks, washing hands and keeping distance, the risk of Covid-19 infection is still present. In the process of distributing

relief goods, interacting with people and moving through crowded areas, the Nuns face constant anxiety and stress. Their dedication and sacrifice posed a great mental and physical challenge.

In addition, due to working hard and often skipping meals and lacking sleep, many nuns have faced exhaustion and decreased resistance. This makes them more vulnerable to diseases and the risk of Covid-19. Balancing dedication and self-care has become a big challenge for nuns during the pandemic.

2.5. Solutions and lessons learned

Faced with the difficulties and challenges posed in charity work during the pandemic, the nuns of Ho Chi Minh City in general and Quan Am Monastery in particular have constantly strived to find solutions and draw valuable lessons. The nuns' flexibility and spirit of learning have helped them adapt to new circumstances and maintain effective charity activities.

One of the outstanding solutions that nuns have applied during the pandemic is to take advantage of the power of social networks and information technology. Faced with restrictions on travel and large gatherings, nuns quickly transitioned to online platforms to maintain connections with Buddhists and the community.

Through applications such as Zoom, Facebook and YouTube, nuns have organized online lectures, chants and sharing of teachings. This not only helps nurture the spiritual life of Buddhists but also creates an opportunity to spread the message of compassion and encourage community spirit. Fundraising and sponsorship programs are also deployed in cyberspace, attracting the participation and support of a large number of people.

In addition, nuns also actively use technology to improve the effectiveness of charity work. The application of volunteer management and coordination software has helped optimize task assignment and monitor activity progress. Digital platforms are also used to collect and verify information about the beneficiaries, ensuring resources are allocated fairly and promptly.

The flexible transition to the online environment has demonstrated the nuns' adaptability and continuous learning spirit. By taking advantage of technology, the Nuns have overcome barriers of space and time, maintaining connection and spreading love to the community in difficult times.

Another important solution that the Nuns have applied is to increase coordination with local organizations and authorities. Realizing that charitable activities cannot be done alone but require the cooperation of the entire community, the Nuns proactively sought cooperation and support from many sides.

Through connecting with local authorities, charitable organizations and volunteer groups, nuns have created a united and effective network in relief work. This coordination helps increase resources, share information and experiences, and avoid overlap and waste in the charity implementation process.

The nuns have also actively participated in meetings and discussions with authorities to grasp the situation and propose appropriate support solutions. Close coordination with the government not only helps ensure the legality and safety of charitable activities but also creates favorable conditions for reaching and supporting difficult people.

Nuns also focus on building trusting and sustainable relationships with partners. Through transparency, responsibility and efficiency in charity work, the Nuns have built reputation and trust from the community. This not only promotes long-term cooperation but also opens up many opportunities to expand and improve the quality of charitable activities in the future.

A strategic solution that the Nuns have implemented is to raise awareness of Buddhists and the community about the importance and meaning of charitable activities. Through teachings, sharing and their own examples, the Nuns have inspired and aroused compassion and sharing in people's hearts.

Nuns have actively organized educational and propaganda programs about the values of compassion, almsgiving and benefiting others. They emphasized that

charitable activities are not just the responsibility of Buddhist monasteries or organizations, but are a common cause for everyone. Through setting an example and sharing touching stories, the nuns have encouraged Buddhists and the community to participate more actively in social welfare work.

In addition, the Nuns also focus on improving Buddhists' understanding of how to practice charity effectively and sustainably. They guide how to choose and use resources wisely, avoiding waste and ostentation. At the same time, the nuns also emphasized the importance of practicing charity with sincerity and without seeking fame or profit, in accordance with the spirit of selflessness and benefiting others of Buddhism.

Through these efforts, the Nuns have contributed to raising awareness and social responsibility of Buddhists and the community. Spreading the spirit of compassion and a culture of sharing not only helps increase resources for charity work but also builds a more compassionate, united and sustainable society.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed many great challenges to society, including the Buddhist nuns in Ho Chi Minh City, specifically the nuns practicing at Quan Am Monastery. However, with a spirit of compassion and determination, the Nuns have continuously strived to maintain and develop charitable activities, bringing support and comfort to those in difficulty.

In the context of resource constraints, social distancing and the risk of infection, nuns have shown flexibility and creativity in finding solutions. Transitioning to online platforms, strengthening coordination with local organizations, and raising awareness among Buddhists and communities are strategic and effective steps.

Through the application of technology and social networks, nuns have overcome barriers of space and time, maintaining close connections with Buddhists and spreading messages of compassion to the community.

Close cooperation with authorities and charities also helps increase resources, share experiences and ensure support reaches those in need.

In particular, raising awareness and social responsibility of Buddhists and the community is one of the important contributions of the Nuns. By inspiring and arousing compassion and sharing, Nuns have contributed to building a more compassionate and united society.

The efforts and contributions of Buddhist nuns in charity work during the pandemic are a shining example of the spirit of altruism, compassion and dedication to the community. The nuns' perseverance and determination in overcoming difficulties and challenges to bring light and hope to those in need is a testament to the noble human values of Buddhism.

In the future, with valuable lessons learned and the solidarity and cooperation of the community, Buddhist nuns will continue to promote their important role in social security work, contributing to building a better society. society of peace, prosperity and sustainable development.

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